

The extent to which police programmes are accountable to national oversight bodies in an age of localism should be clarified for local leaders who have responded positively to the changes in policing

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The transformation of policing is real and is gathering momentum. Nick Gargan argues that police chiefs have welcomed and risen to the new localism agenda but central bodies are still administering direct oversight of programmes making it unclear where ultimate accountability lies. The recent Select Committee session on mobile technologies in policing foreshadows a possible local and national tug-of-war.



Is turbulence inevitable when in-flight programmes pass from the cold air of central direction into the warm air currents of localism? This question hung over me as I emerged from a twilight session of the Public Accounts Committee at the end of February regarding the Mobile Information Programme in policing. The programme had put Blackberries, Androids, tablets, and PDAs in the hands of tens of thousands of police employees.

I was asked to give evidence alongside Dame Helen Ghosh, Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, and Stephen Rimmer, Director General of the Department's Crime and Policing Group. The Public Accounts Committee is the one that all the Civil Servants truly fear. The role of the committee, according to the Parliamentary website, is to examine "the accounts showing the appropriation of the sums granted to Parliament to meet the public expenditure". In other words, to use police jargon, "it has form" for tough, incisive, questioning.

At the Labour Party conference in 2007, Prime Minister Gordon Brown had announced that the 1,000 handheld computers used by police at the time would be increased by 10,000 country-wide, "cutting paperwork so that officers can log crimes on the spot, stay on the beat and not waste time returning to the station to fill out forms."

The Agency set out to deliver that Prime Ministerial commitment with a programme that aimed to equip officers with mobile devices in order to encourage business change and to try and combine both the emergency services network and public telephony networks in a single device (although this final ambition was quickly dropped as it was found to be unrealistic).

On the face of it, the programme was a great success. The National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA), a fledgling Agency at the time, together with the Home Office, Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), and the Association of Police Authorities (APA), succeeded in dramatically increasing the availability of mobile data terminals to the police service.

Looking back on the roll-out now, few would disagree that the need for speedy procurement led to compromises being made elsewhere. Nevertheless, the scheme proved so popular in forces that additional cash was found and instead of 10,000 devices being rolled out, the scheme was extended to ensure that more than 40,000 terminals were delivered by the Spring of 2010. As policing is a local business, individual forces chose to procure devices that best suited their local needs and provided the best fit with local legacy IT systems. The developing national Agency tried to influence the process and to provide support where possible. Working with ACPO, the NPIA was able to insist that no money would be delivered to forces that didn't exhibit, among other selection criteria, a commitment to benefits realisation.

But times move on and no sooner had the programme reached its conclusion – and successfully met the challenge of 2007 – that the criteria of 2010/11 started to be applied. Two important things had changed. The first was to do with money: where the Service had once found it hardly worth the bother to tot up the many slivers and chunks of time that officers were saving by using technology more efficiently (after all, what was the point?), the exercise was suddenly no longer theoretical. The slivers of time were necessary to soften the impact of real cuts in real budgets that had been made as a result of the Spending Review. The Service was demonstrating that better use of technology and the growing transformation in the way policing was delivered meant that you could actually get more policing with fewer police.

The second change was the ascendance of localism and the scrapping of central targetry and monitoring of our policing. The impact of this on the programme was that the (already shrinking) NPIA would switch off the Mobile Information Programme's benefits realisation monitoring in the Spring of 2010 and instead focus its resources on enjoying benefit, not measuring it.

The National Audit Office stepped in, early in 2011, to conduct a review of the Mobile Information Programme. The audit concluded that the programme helped forces adopt mobile technology more widely and at reasonable cost. It acknowledged that many forces reported an increase in time officers spent out of the station, but saw little evidence of benefits having been assessed beyond that basic level. The NAO concluded that although there was still an opportunity to secure value for money from this technology, it had not yet been achieved. The extent to which national level (NPIA) benefits analysis was useful was greatly limited by the fact that the activity had stopped in 2010. And yet, the Public Accounts Committee, expressed frustration about the lack of reliable robust data held at the centre that might enable it to discharge its responsibility to ensure economy, effectiveness and efficiency.

In the meantime, the individual forces have used the funding as a catalyst – an enabler of business change and transformation. Hampshire Chief Constable Alex Marshall told the Committee how the initial central funding had been dwarfed by his force's subsequent investment. The Committee heard about progress in London, in Wiltshire, in Leicestershire and across the Thames Valley. Local leaders, already accountable to Police Authorities and who are preparing for democratically elected Police and Crime Commissioners, are resistant to and sceptical about the extent of central data gathering and central monitoring. The clear message from the Home Office to police forces is that the age of micro-management from the department has largely gone – for all but the most critical national threats. Accountability will be local and bureaucracy will be light.

Yet, the responsibilities of the Public Accounts Committee to Parliament haven't gone away and the frustration of members with an ever lighter grip from institutions at the centre is likely to grow. This may be mitigated only by the fact that there will undoubtedly be fewer comparable programmes moving forward in this economic climate. Nevertheless, there is still plenty of room for tension as central bodies charged with oversight of spending, be they the National Audit Office or the Public Accounts Committee, seek to discharge that responsibility in an environment where operational commanders increasingly expect to be held to account at a local, not national level. Police chiefs are responding well to the new essay question – we just need clarify who's marking their homework.

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